



# THE DESERT AND THE JUNGLE: LOS ANGELES IN MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI'S *ZABRISKIE POINT* AND ROBERT ALTMAN'S *THE LONG GOODBYE*

KATERINA PSILOPOULOU  
NEWNHAM COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Whenever European directors attempt to capture the essence of America, the result can be either grotesque or revelatory, especially during volatile times like the counter-culture movement of the 1960s which piqued the interest of artists from across the pond. Los Angeles, itself the “City of Stars,” has often starred in both American and European productions as the center of this new social reality but with varying different roles. In this paper, I explore how LA is portrayed by two directors – Italian Michelangelo Antonioni and American Robert Altman– in their now classic films *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973), respectively. Despite their different backgrounds, both directors capture the city in a transitory time with varying degrees of cynicism and hope, showcasing in the process the different attitudes Europeans and Americans might have towards one of America’s most iconic cities.

LA is a special city, primarily because of its fluid nature, caught between being an urban center and having been created out of nothing next to a desert. In 1960, urban planner Kevin Lynch published a study focused on Los Angeles as the new, post-modern American city. He interviewed Angelenos about their city and what he found was that, “when asked to describe or symbolize the city as a whole, the subjects used certain standard words: ‘spread out,’ ‘spacious,’ ‘formless,’ ‘without centers’ and someone in particular pointed out that Los Angeles feels as if, ‘you were going somewhere for a long time, and when you got there you discovered there was nothing there, after all’” (1960, 147). This sense of aimlessness and transition was central to the national sentiment reigning in America in the late-1960s and early 1970s. In such a climate, LA proved to be fertile ground for directors and artists to give their own interpretation of what the city means for them and for the national conversation. In Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point*, LA is presented as both an urban center and a



literal desert, where revelations can occur but also spiritual death and stagnation. Meanwhile, in American director Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, the city is a jungle, at once dark and insidious but also lush, lively and ever-changing.

*Zabriskie Point* and *The Long Goodbye* epitomize LA in the turbulent late 1960s, encompassing its multiplicity through their different genre and aesthetic choices. *Zabriskie Point* loosely follows Mark (Mark Frechette), a disenchanting young man, who after an altercation with the police at a college campus flees to the desert on a small-engine plane. There he encounters Daria (Daria Halprin), who is driving to a desert apartment development to meet her boss. The two young people meet and begin a quick relationship which devolves into a psychedelic sequence of them and other couples making love in the dunes. The dream-like aesthetic of the scene continues for the rest of the film, with Mark flying back to LA where he is shot dead by police upon landing. Meanwhile, Daria reaches the development but, having been changed through her experience with Mark, she leaves and has a fantasy of the buildings exploding with branded household goods flying everywhere. The film was a commercial and critical failure, but Antonioni's vision of an innocent America is visible in the casting of amateurs Mark Frechette and Daria Halprin. Antonioni's use of the setting, and specifically the desert, also showcases his belief in America being a Garden of Eden, a place of untamed innocence.

Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, based on the Raymond Chandler novel of the same name, is a reinterpretation of the typical LA noir, satirizing the stereotypical elements of the genre to widely critique the perceived vapidness of Hollywood and Southern California. The plot follows private detective Philip Marlowe (Elliott Gould) trying to exonerate his friend, Terry (Jim Bouton), of the murder of his wife, while also being drawn in by the mysterious Eileen Wade (Nina van Pallandt) and her missing husband, Roger (Sterling Heyden). Altman's version of LA is nothing like the sunny dunes of Antonioni's: Marlowe, by all accounts a moral man, is cast adrift in a "selfish, self-obsessed society where lives can be thrown away without a backward glance...and any notion of friendship and loyalty are meaningless" (O'Brien 1995, 53). Altman's LA is a concrete jungle which has left behind the hopeful spirit of the 1960s and has entered the disillusioned 1970s. The two films, then, utilize the physical and imaginary space of LA in ways that illustrate the different conceptions of the city from an American and European director respectively. As such, the different iterations of America during a crucial point in its history are revealed through their lens.

While the city holds a strong appeal for American directors, European directors seem to be attracted to the desert as a space of revelation and wonder. Wim Wenders most notably used the barren landscape of the Mojave as the backdrop of *Paris, Texas* (1984) to illustrate the spiritual journey of his characters in contrast with the stagnation of city life in L.A. and Houston. In an interview with Roger Ebert, Antonioni said, "[T]he desert is nothing. It is an enormous area of nothing. We do not have spaces like



that in Europe. Perhaps the existence of these great spaces so close to the city says something to me about America" (1969). What that something may be, the director leaves it up to the audiences' discretion. It does seem that Antonioni presents us with two versions of Los Angeles; an urban L.A. which is depicted in a highly realistic, almost documentary manner and then the desert which looks and feels like a pre-original sin Garden of Eden. If the city represents real-life Los Angeles, the desert embodies Hollywood, a land of dreams and visions that seems divorced from reality. It is in the desert that Mark and Daria indulge in dreams and fantasies, including the orgy scene and the imaginary explosions of the desert mansions at the end. Mark and Daria, like Adam and Eve before them, are oblivious of the "real" world. When they first meet, Mark remarks, "I wonder what else is going on in the real world" to which Daria replies, "I don't know. I prefer music." Daria's apolitical stance will be challenged and changed during her time in the desert, and she returns to the real Los Angeles a changed woman, politically active and disillusioned with the materialistic world of her real-estate boss and his associates. Mark, however, does not make it to a spiritual epiphany and is killed by police when he returns the single-engine plane he previously stole. Interestingly, David Jasper notes that, "to fly in a modern jet plane is not to travel but to hang suspended in a moment of anonymous time between two places... [one] must cross the surface of the land and thereby recognize and respect its spaces" (2004, 137). Mark flies back and forth between the real and the imaginary but ends up forever suspended between the two, whereas Daria, who drives across the desert, has a moment of political and spiritual awakening.

Antonioni is interested in vast, empty spaces, while Altman is more preoccupied with enclosed, almost claustrophobic settings that appear jungle-like. Los Angeles in *Zabriskie Point* might be covered in yellow smog and billboards but Mark finds a way to fly above it. Marlowe instead seems to be permanently stuck in a car. The wealthier characters live in gated communities, like animals in a zoo, surrounded by sandy beaches and palm trees that seem artificial. Marlowe's apartment is always dimly lit and in the opening scene he jokingly refers to his cat as a "tiger," a small nod to the humid, jungle-like atmosphere of the apartment. Even when he ventures outside, Marlowe always finds himself in an enclosed space, be it a supermarket or his car. The artificiality and claustrophobic setting are evident in the lives of both the wealthy and working class characters: when Marlowe is hired by the wealthy Eileen Wade to find her missing husband, Roger, he is transported from the grimy streets of his neighborhood to the sun-drenched beach developments. Nonetheless, the Wade house is surrounded by glass and a plethora of potted plants, constricting the otherwise open space. Soon after Roger is found, him and Eileen argue and Marlowe observes them from outside, images of vegetation and the sea are superimposed on the glass, making it look as if the couple is trapped within a jungle.



Altman, then, presents two versions of Los Angeles; there is Marlowe's LA which is populated by gangsters, dingy pubs and crooked cops and then there is the reality of 1970s' Los Angeles, disillusioned by the promises of the 1960s. Marlowe's reality retains some of the dreaminess of Antonioni's desert, the result of uprooting the character from the 1940s' and hurdling him thirty years into the future, but also because of the film's episodic nature. According to Lawrence Webb, "this loosening of the narrative structure into a set of thematic sequences is matched by a spatial destabilization, through which the relatively stable or 'determinate' space of Hollywood genre film is replaced with a sense of insubstantiality and uncertainty about the landscape" (2014, 178). Both genre and landscape, then, are fluid and indeterminate, unsure of their identity at the dawn of the 1970s. The city is torn between its former glories and its current state: Marlowe is an anachronism, the only character shown in a suit and tie, a chain-smoker, who speaks in a slow, somnambulant monotone and drives a 1940s Lincoln while his neighbors are naked hippies, themselves relics of the past.

Altman's Marlowe and his LA are a parody of Hollywood and the myriad tropes that make the noir genre: as James Naremore notes, instead of "witty dialogue and wry, offscreen narration" the film gives us "inarticulate characters and a mumbling private eye" (Naremore 2008, 163). The cinematography participates as well: "in place of carefully framed, angular compositions, it uses a roving, almost arbitrary series of panning and zooming shots that continually flatten perspective" (Naremore 2008, 163). The result is a parody of the noir genre which pointedly critiques the flattening and commodifying effect Hollywood has on film and art, as capitalism encroaches into the creative realm. To make the target of its satire even more obvious, the film opens and ends with a rendition of "Hooray for Hollywood." The song, which first appeared in 1937, satirizes the illusory desire of people who want to become famous stars and has been a staple of the Academy Awards ceremony since. Altman appears to be saying that Hollywood is in on the joke, that the industry understands how ridiculous it can be at times. *The Long Goodbye* is, too, very self-aware of itself as both a serious drama and a satire, as both Los Angeles and Hollywood. As such, it has an anachronistic feel and look that blurs the line between dream and reality. Cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond used Panavision zoom lenses and post-flashing techniques to give the film its washed out and hazy look reminiscent of a dream. Yet, there is another aspect to LA and the Hollywood scene that is violently revealed when gangster Marty Augustine stabs his mistress in the face with a broken bottle. It is the only truly violent scene in the film that shocks Marlowe as much as the viewer and possibly becomes the incentive for the film's final act of violence. Throughout the film, Marlowe tries to retain a glimmer of "Old Hollywood" morality; he is loyal, courteous and trusting but reality is gradually eroding those values. At the end, he does not hesitate to kill his old friend Terry in order to restore justice, or simply, out of frustration, when he realizes he has been trying to exonerate a murderer.



Both Antonioni and Altman touch upon the significance of money and the advancement of capitalism and consumerist culture in their films and use L.A. as an example on which to base their critique of such systems. As Mike Davis points out in *City of Quartz* the city's double-identity regarding money-related themes is deeply ingrained in its nature: "the ultimate world-historical significance—and oddity—of Los Angeles is that it has come to play the double role of utopia *and* dystopia for advanced capitalism" (1990, 18). Altman broaches the issue by critiquing LA's film and consumer culture, while Antonioni is more focused on the blatant pandering of goods to the audience through billboards and aggressive marketing found all over urban Los Angeles. In *The Long Goodbye*, the first time Marlowe ventures out of his apartment he goes to a 24/7 soulless supermarket, complete with fluorescent lights, humorless employees and a muzak rendition of the titular song. The scene, with Marlowe looking for the right brand of cat food, appears almost comical in a noir film. This might be a conscious choice from Altman's part, in order to show how the aesthetics of noir as a genre have been commodified and reproduced so many times as to become cliché and parodied. Erik Dussere suggests that, "Altman's attitude toward consumer culture is largely bound up with his attitude toward Hollywood as a factory for the mass-production of images, including images from the noir tradition that he parodies" (2006, 22). When the supermarket employee says "All that shit's the same anyway" it is as if Altman himself is making a comment on the mass production of images of and from Los Angeles.

Antonioni's critique of LA consumer culture is even more blatant than Altman's, as someone not native to the land who has an outsider's perspective. Marsha Kinder, a film scholar who was present for the filming of *Zabriskie Point*, recalls, "When we were on location in Lone Pine looking at the dry lakebed below Mount Whitney, Antonioni observed that it had been drained because Los Angeles needed the water. It occurred to me that this was another example of Los Angeles as the consumer society" (qtd. in Cardullo 2008, 73). The exploitation of the natural world in the name of accumulation is inserted in the film through the Sunny Dunes subplot, the desert developments that Daria works for. While the subplot is underdeveloped, it plays an important overall role by drawing tentative links between capitalist accumulation, real estate development, and the exploitation of the natural world. In one of the film's bolder moments, a family of tourists arrives at Zabriskie Point and instead of marveling at the view, suggest opening a drive-thru in the natural monument. As Antonioni remarked, "[Americans] are consumers. They are used to wasting something-goods, material, food, everything." (qtd. in Cardullo 2008, 75). This waste and accumulation culminates into the final dream sequence, where Daria is imagining the modern desert mansions explode in slow-motion with common household commodities standing out, notably, a box of Special K cereal and a loaf of Wonderbread.



The barrage of branded goods advertised all over LA was another aspect of the city that left an impression on Antonioni: “The billboards are an obsession of Los Angeles. They are so strong that you can’t avoid them...to us billboards are so contrary but for people who live there they are nothing-they don’t even see them” (qtd. in Cardullo 73). The film has many rapidly edited shots of billboards advertising everything from watches to movies and food, that overwhelm the viewer to the point where they are individually indistinguishable. The camera zooms in further, passing a series of pylons, cranes, cylinders, containers, and scrap heaps that become increasingly flattened and abstracted into masses of shape and color, accompanied by a heavily industrial and psychedelic soundtrack that gives the city a hectic, disorienting quality. Mark drives past a *trompe l’oeil* mural depicting serene pastoral scenes that cut abruptly to the working-class reality of the city of Vernon, the nearest city to downtown L.A., which prides itself for being “exclusively industrial” (Krasnowski 2006). The scene then cuts to Mark driving through the palm-tree lined boulevards of L.A. that a film audience is more familiar with. The abrupt editing gives the city a disjointed and alienating look and feel. Mark’s aimless wandering is similar to *The Long Goodbye*’s wandering camera which is constantly in motion, bustling with nervous energy. Marlowe and Mark, like many Angelenos before them, choose to drive—or in Mark’s case, fly—to disperse that energy caused by the constant need to accumulate and spend.

Antonioni and Altman come from vastly different cultural backgrounds, yet they present a similar vision of late 1960s and early 1970s Los Angeles. Influences of both European and American elements can be found in both films. *The Long Goodbye* owes its unique look to Hungarian cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond and its disjointed style to the French New Wave. The noir genre as a whole is thought to be pioneered by the Weimar filmmakers of the 1930s. Davis writes about noir, “[it is] a fantastic convergence of American ‘tough-guy’ realism, Weimar expressionism, and existentialized Marxism—all focused on unmasking...Los Angeles” (1992, 18). *Zabriskie Point* retains a lot of its director’s art-house look but focuses on issues that are closely related to Los Angeles like the urban crisis of the late 60s and the political and social unrest following Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement. The film’s opening features prominent Black Panthers member Kathleen Cleaver addressing the student coalition, most of whom are not actors but actual students. This scene combines the European *cinema vérité* style with contemporary American figures and issues, merging European and American art in a newfound way that reflected the social realities of the slowly waning 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ironically, it is Antonioni who concludes with an optimistic vision of Los Angeles and America. Daria returns from the desert changed, with explosive ideas and visions, a poster-child for the kind of social change that Antonioni dreamed the American youth could achieve. When asked to summarize his experience of America and L.A., Antonioni said, “waste, innocence, vastness, poverty...It is a city that no one likes at



first, but after a while you can find places, little corners, places in the city that you can begin to like” (Kinder 2008, 92). Antonioni’s Los Angeles is in a state of flux and despite the divisiveness within the counterculture movement, he is hopeful that the youth can achieve true change. Only three years elapsed between *The Long Goodbye* and *Zabriskie Point*, and yet Altman’s Los Angeles feels completely different from Antonioni’s desert-city. Altman’s film follows a character out of space and out of time. U.S. involvement in Vietnam had petered out, the Watergate Scandal was underway and the youth was abandoning the counterculture movement for a more cynical and mainstream lifestyle. Marlowe’s hippy neighbors are relics of a bygone time, much like himself and much like the Los Angeles that a contemporary audience had come to know through noir films. Ultimately, both Antonioni and Altman cast a harsh and critical light on Los Angeles and the different fads and cultures surrounding it and thus on America as a whole. However, Antonioni turns that spiritual wasteland into a prophet’s desert where new ideas can be born. Altman’s Marlowe is forever trapped in a concrete jungle of violence, having left the “summer of love” long behind.

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